C.A.M. Hermans

Prof. C.A.M. Hermans, Emeritus professor of Practical Theology and the Empirical Study of Religion, Radboud University, The Netherlands; Extraordinary Professor, Department Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa.
E-mail: chris.hermans@ru.nl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9416-3924

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Resilient religion: What good is religion for?

> Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? (Mathew 5:13: King James Bible)

ABSTRACT

Good refers to the intrinsic value or telos *(purpose) of religion. The author starts with the claim that religion keeps alive, in thinking, the awareness of ultimate meaning ("truth"); in actions, the focus on human dignity and the common good, and, in the heart of man, the longing for fulfilling happiness, peace of heart, and love. As spiritual beings, human beings transcend the given towards the* telos *or purpose of life. At the same time, human beings experience being thrown in the limits of time and space. When the synthesis between the self as open to the ultimate and the self as limited is not realised, human beings experience a heartbreaking adversity. The intrinsic value of religion is the promotion of this synthesis. The author analyses three mediating processes of resilience that promote the possibility of a synthesis: the recognition of contingency, the experience of fulfilling happiness, and the wonder of possibilisation (new beginnings). Finally, the author links resilience to the concept of God as creator.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Good refers to the intrinsic value or *telos* (purpose) of religion. Each domain or sphere of life has its own purpose: quality of life is the intrinsic value of healthcare, and good education is the intrinsic value of education. Religion can also be regarded as good for aspects such as moral values in society or psychosocial well-being. This article focuses on

the intrinsic good (purpose) of religion, as formulated in the subtitle "What good is religion for?". I will formulate three sets of questions to illustrate this intrinsic value.

First, Are you happy? Is there a fulfilling happiness that fills you heart? Is your neighbour, whom you know by name and face, happy? Is the person who lives in your society and whose name you do not know, is this anonymous person happy?

- My first claim: Religion keeps alive, in the heart of man, the demand for fulfilling happiness (peace of heart).

Secondly, it may be correct that people act according to the rule, but is what they do good? Do people act towards other people in respect for their human dignity? Do we act together towards the common good for the well-being of all who live in our society?

- My second claim: Religion keeps alive, in human actions with and for others in fair institutions, the focus on human dignity and the common good.

Finally, when we think about something, is this a mere construction of our own perspective? Is there an ultimate meaning in the object of our knowing? Can we think of an objective character of things in the world that are given to us?[1]

- My third claim: Religion keeps alive, in thinking, the openness for ultimate meaning (truth) in the thing.

My argument for the three claims will be grounded on the concept of resilient religion (Hermans & Schoeman 2022). Why? Resilience theory has its roots in the study of adversity and how the effect of adverse life experiences can be processed or prevented (Van Breda 2018). The kind of adversity, which is the focus of religion, is being alienated from happiness, ultimate meaning (truth), human dignity, and the common good (see further below).

The kind of resilience, which religion offers, are processes that connect experiences of the self to the good in life events (here and now). This is quite different from the processes of adaptation that are the focus of the social sciences and natural sciences. Where adaptation refers to bouncing back and finding the best condition to deal with changes in this order, the outcome of processes of resilience in religion is transformation to a new order of fulfilling happiness in and of our existence, human dignity, and ultimate meaning (truth).

1 Kant gives the following example of this objectival character in pure imagination. Quality, he observes, allows itself to be determined in "an anticipation of the perception" according to which no perception can be constituted without a *degree* in the quality … Thus, cherry red affects me, but in such a way that it makes possible *a priori* the ever more subtle discernment of a connoisseur. The quality is such that it can at once be felt and determined. That is its objectival character" (Ricoeur 1986:39, footnote 17).

There are three preliminary considerations on the theoretical perspective of this article. First, I want to approach the question of the intrinsic value of religion from the perspective of becoming people on the way of self-knowledge. I will draw my arguments from philosophers such as Ricoeur, Arendt, and Strasser who developed their ideas in conversation with Augustine. According to Ricoeur (1991a:5-30), Augustine's contribution to the way of self-knowledge, human experience of time, and the search for God who is in and above us can be considered the most original contribution of Christianity to Western thinking. By taking up these arguments in finding an answer to the intrinsic value of religion, I think that I serve theology and religion more than with an inner theological debate.

Secondly, I want to build a line of argument for religion in general, not only for the Christian religion in all its variants. I am well aware that my philosophical conversation partners are in discussion with Christian theologians. I claim that my argument is valid for other religions than Christianity. Whether my claim is correct needs to be tested in a critical dialogue.

Thirdly, the reflection on "what religion is good for" needs to be deliberately contextualised from the context of dehumanisation, colonisation, apartheid, and post-apartheid South Africa (Forster 2023). For example, we do not know how the gift of love can transform people's lives, unless we deliberately contextualise it in the lives of people living in extreme poverty in South Africa (Hermans 2017). I will contextualise my line of argument both from the European context in which I live, and from research by my Ph.D. students in South Africa. But I understand that more work needs to be done to contextualise the theory of resilient religion, which I am advocating (Hermans & Schoeman 2022).

2. OUTLINE

According to Van Breda (University of Johannesburg) (2018:4), any resilience theory in an academic field consists of three building blocks, namely a kind of adversity, resilience as a process dealing with this adversity, and a resilient system as outcome of this process. I will start with this question: What kind of adversity is religion involved in? In my argument, I will connect this kind of adversity to the three questions raised earlier. I will then answer the question: What mediating processes characterise resilience in religion? I will focus on three processes: recognition of contingency, experience of fulfilling happiness, and the wonder of possibilisation (new beginnings). Finally, I will link the concept of resilient religion to the concept of God as creator. I will conclude by wrapping up the line of argumentation of this article.

3. HEARTBREAKING ADVERSITY

The kind of adversity that is the object of religion can be characterised as heartbreaking adversity. Heartbreaking adversity refers to the possibility of being alienated from a part of man that lifts him up to fulfilling happiness, the good life, and ultimate freedom. Human beings need not only food and shelter, social security, and education, but also to have a purpose in life, an ultimate meaning to live and to die for, a passion of the heart, hope in a future without end. People not only die from extreme poverty, but also from the feeling of a broken heart, of not finding any meaning in life, not having a place in this world.

How is this heartbreaking adversity possible? This possibility of heartbreaking adversity is anchored in the ontological constitution of the human being as a person with a life in the spirit (Ricoeur 1986:131-132). As spiritual beings, human beings transcend the given towards the possible, towards ideals and the *"telos"* or purpose of life. On the other hand, human beings experience being thrown into time and space, into a body with possibilities and limitations, and a predetermined history.

There are three possibilities in human experience: first, the self as experiencing itself as limited; secondly, the self as experiencing itself as open towards the unlimited, and thirdly, the synthesis between the two when the ultimate is experienced in reality which is finite (Ricoeur 1986:82). The brokenness or vulnerability of human beings rests on this failure to experience a synthesis between the self as finite and the openness of the self to the infinite.

In line with his teacher Gabriel Marcel, Ricoeur understands this synthesis as an enigma and a mystery, and not as a problem to be solved (Lowe 1986:x-xii). Characteristic of an enigma is that the knower knows that the object of our imagination cannot be known completely, or that the agent knows that we do not fully understand the human dignity of the other and the common good of the community which we need to honour in our acts. In the synthesis that we seek, we understand the object of our knowledge or the good as goal of our acting as unimaginable, which can never be mastered in our thinking and acting. Regarding the human heart, Ricoeur (1986:96) speaks of a mystery in which the questioner himself is put to question. To inquire about the self is to seek to understand the mystery of the soul. This mystery is ultimately the restlessness of human beings to seek themselves, a desire that finds its origin in God (Sweeney 2016:678).

4. *DISTENTIO ANIMI*

Resilience in religion is grounded in the ontological constitution of man as gifted with spirit, and the experience of heartbreaking adversity (Hermans 2022a:19). The human soul is the embodiment of a finite mind, but with a desire for the absolute (Tallon 1992:356). Augustine defined the human experience of time as "*distentio animi*", being challenged by human concerns and experiences of fragmentation, the quest for permanence in time, and the failure to create this because of the finite condition of being thrown in time and space (Ricoeur 1991a; O'Daly 1977). What does "*distentio animi*" mean for Augustine?

The first thesis of Augustine is that time is real (Boeij 2008:65). It exists in memory (the present of the past), expectation (the present of the future), and attention (the present of the present). Human beings' experiences of instability of time comes from the incessant dissociation of past, future, and present in their experience of time (Ricoeur 1991b:31).

The second thesis is that this dissociation of time in three forms is not in space (objectively). The celestial bodies and their movements are only given to us in order to measure time, but their motion is not the time (Boeij 2008:65). It is a reality in the mind and heart (spirit) of human beings (subjectively) who have the intention (*intentio animi*) to engage as persons in time, in order to understand themselves.

Thirdly, the human spirit cannot but experience time in the soul as unity (Boeij 2008:66). What is dissociated in time exists in the soul as a quest for permanence in time (Ricoeur 1991b:195). A quest for coherence of the "who", an existential desire to know ourselves as selfsame which we discover in the restlessness of the heart. This restlessness is a sense of dividedness of the self as a hint by God to seek the soul for the true self (Sweeney 2016:685). At the center of us lies not us, but God. If we discover God as the Selfsame, we note that God unites in eternity what is dissociated in time.

> Eternity also intensifies the experience of distentio (extension) and calls on this experience to surpass itself by moving towards eternity rather than be fascinated by rectilinear time (Malan 2017:6).

Ricoeur (1991b:31) summarises "*distentio animi*" as follows:

> It consists in the permanent contrast between the unstable nature of the human present and the stability of the divine present which include past, present and future in the unity of a gaze and a creative action.

I will return to the notion of infinity as "stability of the present" in Section 5. I conclude that our experience of existence in time is characterised by our experience of the unstable nature of the human present, on the one hand, and the self as in resonance with the divine present as eternal present, as the infinite "now", and the absence of a synthesis between the two, on the other.

This instability of time is the foundation for the possibility of a disproportionality in human experience between the self as finite and the self in resonance with the infinite. If the synthesis between both experiences of the self does not take place, we experience a heartbreaking adversity. Following Ricoeur, we can experience this lack of synthesis in our thinking, acting and feeling. The disproportionality pervades the whole human being.

5. HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF DISPROPORTIONALITY

How do human beings experience disproportionality? We distinguish three capacities of human beings, namely thinking, acting, and feeling.[2] Disproportionality emerges in each capacity differently.

5.1 Thinking

The disproportionality that defines human thinking lies in taking a specific point of view, on the one hand, the meaning (truth) of the object of our thought, on the other, and the synthesis in thinking between perspective and truth.[3] I illustrate this with an actual example. What is a sustainable society? Is climate change a fact in the object of our knowing?

2 Disproportion (Ricoeur 1986:81-82) is apprehended on three modes of human existence: in thinking on the objectivity of the thing, in acting on the humanity of the person, and in feeling in which disproportion of happiness and character is interiorized in the heart (*i.e.*, the soul).

3 See Hermans (2022a:22-23). When Ricoeur conceptualises thinking, he refers to the Kantian idea of transcendental imagination. The synthesis in the theoretical order, which transcendental imagination brings about between understanding and sensibility (or in our terminology, between meaning and appearance, between speaking and looking), is *consciousness* but that is not *self-consciousness* (Ricoeur 1986:45). The consciousness philosophy speaks of in its transcendental stage constitutes its own unity only outside of itself, on the object. According to Ricoeur, it is the first stage of a philosophical anthropology. "Whoever would want to commit it to the flames and start right off with a philosophy of the person would leave the *pathétique* only to fall into a fanciful ontology of being and nothingness." If man is a mean between being and nothingness, it is *primarily* because he brings about "mediations" in things; his intermediate place is *primarily* his function as a mediator of the infinite and the finite in things (Ricoeur 1986:46). For a more extended view on the difference between Ricoeur and Kant, see Hermans (2022a:21-22).

In our thinking, we can only take a particular point of view when we think about climate change and sustainability. Some people in this debate will claim a certain position, by voicing the idea that there is no climate change. In doing so, they disregard the difference between taking a specific point of view with the perspective of truth, which lies in the object of our knowing. Is it a truth that is given in the object of our knowledge of our ecological system, of our climate? A debate in politics or society, which voices only opinions about a sustainable society, will lead to frustration, conflict, and a deepening crisis because it will never reach a synthesis between specific points of view and the truth, which is given in nature as ecological system. Worldwide, politicians deny the insights of academic research on climate change. The strength of academic research is to follow a method whereby the object of our knowledge can speak to us. This implies that the result of the research can run against our opinion. But to disregard academic research as opinions is a dangerous process in society, specifically if it is done by politicians or the media.

On the other hand, environmental activists suffer a heartbreaking adversity by the failure to express in our thinking a synthesis between a specific perspective and the truth given in nature as ecological system. This lack of synthesis is fed by a digital society with media that lock people in closed communities by their algorithms. In our "digital bubble", we only hear our own opinions and we swap this with truth that is in the object of our knowledge.

5.2 Acting

Human acting is characterised by a disproportion between the determination of my character as agent, the absoluteness or limitlessness of the human dignity (humanity) of every human being and the common good, and the synthesis between them (Hermans 2022a:23). My character as human agent is limited. We can realise that we fall short in treating others with the human dignity to which they are entitled. This can be the other whom I know by name and by face: my friend, my relative, my neighbour, or a person in my community. But it can also be an anonymous other in our society who has no name and no face for me. We can fall short in our openness to human dignity. "My character and my humanity together make of my freedom an unlimited possibility and a constituted partiality" (Ricoeur 1986:61).

For example, immigrants in our society are not even registered in our administration systems; people in our society lack access to clean water or sanitation. Since COVID-19, there are growing numbers of immigrants in Europe. Our systems cannot provide shelter and food in the locations where they are lodged on arrival in our country. People need to sleep outside without a proper shelter. They are not treated with human dignity. Politicians in my country also wanted to temporarily stop the process of reunification of families

who were separated in the process of immigration. This measure also runs against human dignity. Because of international laws and agreements, our government was forced to reopen that programme of re-unification of families. Do we experience heartbreaking adversity when we observe that our systems in society are not treating the immigrants in our society with human dignity? Do we protest when the government is sending immigrants home because of insufficient paperwork? This is correct according to the rule, but do we understand that it is not good? Do we feel a heartbreaking adversity?

5.3 Feeling

The disproportionality in feeling lies in the difference between the limitedness of our feelings, the limitlessness of infinite joy or happiness, and the synthesis between the two.

This vulnerability of our feeling is *my vulnerability*. I experience myself as vulnerable. This is me! (Hermans 2022a:23-24). In order to understand the synthesis, Ricoeur distinguishes between pleasure and happiness considered as something that has permanence in time. One can experience pleasure in singing. The joy of singing gives vitality to life. But pleasure ends as soon as one stops singing. Ricoeur calls happiness that is fulfilling and limitedness, a spiritual joy (Ricoeur 1986:92), and the "Joy of YES!" (Ricoeur 1986:110). For example, the joy we experience when being forgiven by the other, or the happiness we experience when reconciliation happens between communities who differ in colour and power.

There is no awareness of infinite happiness in life without realising the limits of our joy, and vice versa. The synthesis is fragile because human beings experience a fulfilling happiness in the joy of some particular event. Time will go by and something can happen that will make us feel disconnected from this unlimited happiness.

6. PROCESSES OF RESILIENCE

What processes of resilience help people deal with heartbreaking adversity? If situations of heartbreaking misery are characterised by the absence of a synthesis between the self as limited and the self as open towards unlimitedness, the processes of resilience need to foster the synthesis between the self as finite and the self as open towards infinity. The answer to the question "What is religion good for?" concerns processes of the self as spirit. In its practices and stories, in its language and rituals, in prophetic protest and in helping people in need, religion must foster processes that unleash the power of the spirit. In other words, these processes must focus on experiencing the good in and of events (concrete and particular facts) in our life with and for others.

In the book *Resilient religion* (Hermans 2022b), I distinguish four processes of resilience: recognition of contingency; transcendental openness; experience of unlimited happiness, and the work of mourning in tragic situations.

In this article, I focus on the process of recognition of contingency, and the experience of unlimited happiness. I add a fifth process, namely the wonder of possibilisation or new beginnings that relates to human acting. In reflecting on the processes of resilience (Hermans 2019), I realised that I missed a process of resilience focused on acting. In this article, I want to fill that gap.

6.1 Recognition of contingency

Heartbreaking adversity presupposes the recognition that the good is not experienced as a reality in our life.

> I could just as good be dead … There is no happiness in my life … There is nobody who is near to me … (Hermans 2022c).

The synthesis between the limited self and the self that resonates to the unlimited is a risk and not a necessity. If the synthesis were a necessity, it would be impossible for human beings to experience a heartbreaking adversity.

Contingency refers to the unpredictability and uncertainty of the event in which this synthesis emerges. We could describe contingency as "[w]hat is not, from the possibility to be, and what is, from the possibility not to be" (Van der Heiden 2014:260). Contingency is a marker of our human condition (ontology). We experience things that happen in our life as contingent: unexpectedly, "what is" is no longer there, and "what is not" unexpectedly appears as a possibility. The (non-)appearance of the possibility of a synthesis is contingent. The essence of this (non-)appearance is that it is unexpected, by definition new, and different to what we had thought.

Contingency is not "in the facts", but "in the becoming subject", where people experience no future or the loss of future, or the unexpected opening of future. An experience of contingency is subjective. The same fact can be interpreted as contingent by one subject, and as not contingent by another. According to the Dutch philosopher Delahaye (2018), contingency is intimately related to the concept of temporality. Delahaye does not refer to the experience of time as "*distentio animi*", but to the Pauline idea of living towards the end of time which comes unexpected.

> Pauline temporality means living life towards the end of time which will come at an undetermined moment in the future. This effects a radical contingency in life, because it wrestles control away from it. Pauline subjectivity denies necessity and accepts insecurity, in view of the wonder of possibilisation (Delahaye 2018:24).

In our experience of time, there is radical contingency, according to Paul. And this experience of radical contingency deepens our experience of "*distentio animi*" in the sense that the future is radically contingent. The soul that lives towards the end of time accepts an undetermined moment in the future. In denying necessity, we accept insecurity.

The denial of contingency implies the acceptance that everything happens by necessity. Necessity implies that there is a causal explanation for every action and every failure to act. And a causal explanation for every feeling and the failure to care and love. If everything is necessary, then there is no possibility of the unexpected, no hope for transformation of what is considered hopeless, no openness for the unexpected possible. Resilience in religion is based on the power of the unexpected possible: in "what is" from the possibility "not to be", and in "what is not" from the possibility "to be".

The recognition of contingency differs from the other processes of resilience, in the sense that it is presumed by all other processes of resilience in religion. The basis for this is that contingency refers to man's mode of being (ontology) (Hermans 2020:9). In an ontology of contingency, the general form of man's mode of being is thought of as the singular, *i.e.*, the unknown, unexpected, different, or other.

> The singular event is par excellence that which escapes the principle of sufficient reason, and which can only be found outside its boundaries (Van der Heiden 2014:16).

Sufficient reason refers to the principle that there is a reason, cause, or ground for why *"x"* is the case (being), and why *"x"* appears in this specific form (being so and not different). Recognition of contingency refers to the experience of the unexpectedness of an event – in the sense of "possible", but not necessarily "rational", in the sense that there is a sufficient reason or cause. Acknowledging contingency *eo ipso* implies acknowledging the limits of reason and accepting the possibility of "the Other of Reason" (Wuchterl 2011; 2019).

Recognition of contingency ("the other than reason") is not the same as experiencing an ultimate meaning or fulfilling happiness. It opens the door for the possibility of this event but it can neither be controlled nor enforced. The event escapes the principle of sufficient reason; it is unpredictable, unexpected and, by definition, new compared to everything we experienced previously.

Contingency refers to the moment when the possibility of a synthesis appears in reality. The essence of this appearance is that it is unexpected, by definition, new and different to what we had thought.

6.2 Happiness

Being able to perceive possibilities that are experienced as absolute, unlimitedness shows that we are beings gifted with spirit (*logos*).[4] On the level of the spirit, we are able to project completely abstract values such as peace, health, beauty, and truth. How is that possible? Seeing pure possibilities belongs to the field of the level of the Spirit.

> Such possibilities are not grasped by feeling but are seen by thought. The Logos is indeed, among other things, the possibility of grasping, ordering and fixing abstract connections in concepts and categories, and on that basis, advancing to new insights (Strasser 1977:246).

On the level of the spirit, there are different felt modes of readiness. We need to distinguish them along two dimensions, namely stability (will the intention last?) and spiritual meaning (what is the good?) (Hermans 2020:16). Happiness is the anticipation of experience of the perfect, unlimited good in the reality of an event in my life. The Nijmegen philosopher Stephan Strasser (1977:37) defines happiness as follows:

> Happiness consists in an anticipation of the perfectly good. It is a defective anticipation of the experience of fulfillment, an adequacy limited to a few aspects, an imperfect realization of the ultimate completion of our own existence.

The experience of happiness anticipates the perfect good, which is greater than is manifested in this event (Hermans 2022b:38). The realisation of the good keeps something in reserve with regard to the ultimate fulfilment. The perfect good takes shape, but only insofar as this event can be transparent to the perfect good. It is adequate in the sense that it is a realisation of the perfectly good, but this actualisation comprises only some aspects and not the totality of the perfectly good. Therefore, Strasser (1977:37) calls it an imperfect realisation of the ultimate completion of our existence .

Passions are a specific kind of basic transcending comportment, that is a lasting readiness to a way of living, acting, and thinking.[5] The ideal possibility (transcendence) is felt as the reality of our life; the perfect good emerges

4 In this instance, Strasser uses Logos in the sense in which it is used in ancient Greek philosophy and early Christian theology referring to the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning (https://www.britannica.com/topic/logos). For an introduction to the relationship between “pneuma” (“spirit”) in the Gospel of John and “logos” (“word” or “mind”) in the prologue of John, see Engberg-Pedersen (2012).

5 “By basic comportment we understand a structure of attitudes, convictions and modes of comportment which is expressed in a relatively constant readiness for determinate modes of behaviour” (Strasser 1977:279).

as actuality of/in us. This overwhelming power gives us an enduring power to transform social life forms and institutions to operate in line with this absolute good (Hermans 2020:17). Strasser (1977:370-372) identifies five characteristics of this experience of happiness.[6]

- First, happiness implies the realisation of a transcendent moment in, and of reality. It is a partial anticipation of fulfilment, but nevertheless the awareness of fulfilment is there.
- Secondly, this experience of happiness is characterised by a state of mind, which Strasser describes as euphoric, delirious, and blissful. We cannot experience the infinite that emerges in the concrete and definite without stepping outside of ourselves. "The 'object' of this blissful experience is such that a subject is overwhelmed by its richness, inexhaustibility and boundlessness" (Strasser 1977:370).
- Thirdly, happiness is an experience of harmony with the world as a whole, and of our place in it. Harmony requires a certain balance and the right proportions.
- Fourthly, happiness is contentment or the experience of peace with ourselves. "The experience of happiness will always be his concrete experience, and thus will be limited by his capacity to assimilate the inexhaustibility of the good-in-itself" (Strasser 1977:372).
- Fifthly, happiness is both a possibility that can become a reality in life, and a risk, because this happiness cannot be enforced. We can have fun, but not enforce a lasting and fulfilling happiness.

6.3 The wonder of possibilisation: New beginnings

When God asks Adam: "Where art thou?' (Gen. 2), God wants to, according to the Jewish philosopher Buber (2002:10),

> produce an effect in man which can only be produced by just such a question, provided that it reaches man's heart – that man allows it to reach his heart.

According to Buber, man hears God's call as an inner voice speaking in him. If man wants to escape from this voice or tries to hide from the eye of God, he is *eo ipso* hiding from himself.

6 Part of this text is also published in the article by Hermans & Kornet (2020), *Spirituality as passions of the heart.*

Why do we need the event of emerging new beginning(s)? Only new beginnings can escape the illusion of immortality on the part of mortals who think eternity. If a synthesis between an experience of infinite, "the JOY of YES" does not emerge in the experience of finite time, we would consider the idea of infiniteness, eternity an illusion. And we also experience the limits of our capacity to possibilise the future, which raises questions about our existence in the future. This brings us back to the problem of permanence in time.

If we claim that religion keeps alive, in human actions, the focus on human dignity and the common good, we define resilience in acting as the wonder of possibilisation of human dignity and the common good where it "was not". The power of resilience in human acting is making new beginnings in life with and for others.

> The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'material' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. (Arendt 1978:247).

Only "natality", as the unexpected event of emerging new beginning(s), can escape the illusion of immortality on the part of mortals who think eternity. Instead of natality, Ricoeur (2005:2) speaks of "becoming capable, being recognized".[7] A human being is someone who starts speaking and acting, and by doing so is "installed" as a subject. Arendt derives this idea from Augustine: Man knows that he has a beginning and that he will have an end. Because man knows that he is temporal and not eternal, the primary question of man is the possibility of existing in the future.

> With man, created in God's image, a being came into the world that, because it was a beginning running toward an end, could be endowed with the capacity of willing and nilling (Arendt 1978:110).

In order to have a future, there must be a beginning for something that was not there previously. The human will is involved in this future orientation of mankind. The "I can" shows itself in the will to act and to speak. This power of a new beginning creates something new. Only through the power of new beginnings (that is, the wonder of possibilisation) does subjectivity emerge as a dynamic process of coming into existence. With this subjectivity, the capability to speak, to forgive, to respect human dignity, and so on.

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7 Ricoeur refers to basic capabilities as speaking and acting, telling and remembering, and to capabilities as making a promise, blaming oneself, forgiving, and hoping. The first capacities are more or less morally neutral; the last clearly express a moral quality (Ricoeur 2005:2).

I like to give you an example of this wonder of possibilisation. In an article on the theological virtue of love (Hermans 2017), I connected this event of possibilisation to a context of extreme poverty, which happens to be a fact of life for too many people in Africa. Two of my Ph.D. students are doing practice-oriented research involving people living in extreme poverty in Igalaland (Nigeria) and in a township on the Cape Flats (South Africa).[8] The project in South Africa involves young adults, rehabilitated or still using drugs, generally unemployed, from a generational line of poverty, from the society, who have been systematically marginalised and exploited by the apartheid government, and who have been particularly disadvantaged by the current educational system. The wrong practices and a mindset focused only on short-term goals – finding money and food – keeps them in the cycle of poverty.[9] We know from research that all blueprint programmes are due to fail. Young people in extreme poverty need to co-create, in the support group, their way out of this situation of scarcity that fits their specific setting and context. In the support group, they will diagnose their situation, and what keeps them in this circle of scarcity. Can they also entrust themselves to a possible future of happiness, that God is working in their lives, as a longing of the heart? Can they experience the wonder of a new beginning: "Yes I can" and "I am recognised and affirm others"? Based on these experiences, they need to, within the support group, formulate necessary conditions for their way out of their trap of extreme poverty.

7. GOD AS CREATOR

A resilient religion links processes of resilience to God as Creator. My argument proceeds in three steps. First, the quest for permanence in time, which is grounded in the ontology of man as spiritual being, is connected to the idea of infinity. Secondly, the synthesis between the self as finite and the self as open to infinity is in God as Creator primordial to the dividedness. Thirdly, the longing for infinity, for fulfilling happiness or ultimate meaning is in the heart of man by memory of being created.

First step, the experience of heartbreaking adversity shows that happiness is not a certainty. In life, fulfilling happiness does not last forever. At the same time, we experience in ourselves a longing for ultimate happiness which does not perish. Augustine described this as the "*distentio animi*". We summarised this idea in the words of Ricoeur (1991b:31) as follows:

8 The PhD project in Nigeria is done by Father Charles Ajogi (at the Radboud University); the second project in South Africa is done by Euodia Volanie (as a joint PhD project between Stellenbosch and Radboud University).

9 These ideas are based on the theory of scarcity (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013).

> It consists in the permanent contrast between the unstable nature of the human present and the stability of the divine present which include past, present and future in the unity of a gaze and a creative action.

Human beings have a quest for permanence in time, but due to the cruel bite of time, there is no certainty. They long for love, ultimate meaning, and fulfilling happiness that encompasses past, present, and future. This is evident in the simple question of a child to her mother: "Do you love me?". This child does not ask if the mother will only love her today. But will you always love me? Is your love permanent in time? The experience of the child is fragile. She remembers past experiences, compares them with present experiences, and imagines what to expect in the future. It leads, according to Ricoeur, to an unstable nature of the human present of the love of her mother. Will her love always be there to help her? We come to understand that permanence (or stability) in time demands a present that encompasses past, present, and future. In any moment in time, in any present (now, past, or future) the ultimate meaning of life, happiness needs to always fulfil my life. This means that the quest for permanence in time is a quest for stability of the present, an eternal now, an enduring happiness in past, present, and future.

Secondly, according to Augustine, human longing for happiness and love has its origin in the awareness of being created (Hermans 2022c:49-50). Being born makes us aware that we are not our own origin. Perfect happiness does not depend on man; it is prior to human birth. In God as Creator, the unity between the good (unlimited) and reality (limited) is more primordial than the brokenness and heartbreaking adversity that people experience. By placing the synthesis of the self as limited and the self as openness to infinity in God, it is more original in the sense of primordial than the division and failure of man. The synthesis, which finds its origin and future in God, precedes the division and brokenness which human beings can experience in heartbreaking adversity.

Thirdly, man knows God as Creator only through memory, because creation came before our existence.

> The Creator is in man only by virtue of man's memory, which inspires him to desire happiness and with it an existence that would last forever: 'Hence I would not be, my God, I would not exist at all, if you were not in me', namely, in my memory (Arendt 1998:Part II, 1. The Origin; eKindle 1145).

According to Augustine, God is in me in the desire for fulfilling happiness. What is more, in this desire for happiness I love God as the divine stability, the eternal now. For Augustine, to desire happiness is to desire an existence

that would last forever. This desire does not originate from the experience of the present, but from memory. We can become aware of a boundary beyond which lies "what was before" or "preceded" human existence. It is in this memory of being created, that I understand not to exist at all, if God was not in me as a desire for fulfilling happiness, the good life with and for other, "The Joy of Yes".

8. WHERE IS RELIGION GOOD FOR?

I started this article with the question: "What is religion good for?". What is the intrinsic value of religion in society? Religion keeps a sense of the human dimension alive in society. We should not make a person "small", but raise him/her to the perspective of purpose, human dignity, and fulfilling happiness, peace, and love. Religion keeps alive, in thinking, the awareness of ultimate meaning ("truth"); in actions, the focus on human dignity and the common good, and in the heart of man, the longing for fulfilling happiness, peace of heart and love.

But human nature also implies the awareness that we can fail and do not give room for the good in our thinking, acting, and heart. A society without religion is in danger of hardening and becoming merciless. The awareness of fallibility is not a weakness, but a sign of resilience. And that is what religion is good for!

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